

Today's rush to collect private information online is about to create a mega-backlash

by Jim Carroll

IBM has announced that it won't advertise on any Web site that does not feature a privacy policy that clearly states how private information collected through the site might be used.

I loudly applaud IBM's move, and think it's one of the few companies that recognizes one very simple and important fact: many of those who use the Internet are becoming increasingly annoyed at efforts by companies to collect private information, and are increasingly distrustful of the corporate sector when it comes to their statements as to how they might use such information.

Indeed, I've come to believe that the current rush to collect private information on the Net will soon cause companies significant and long-lasting damage, as they face a consumer backlash of unprecedented proportions.

Think about what has happened here in the last few years. Many corporate marketing departments, awed by the unique one-on-one capabilities of the wired world, have come to view their Web sites as nothing more than a tool by which all kinds of useful marketing- and demographic-related information can be collected. There's a feeding frenzy of methods and technologies that involve the collection of information about those who spend some time at a Web site.

The orgy of enthusiasm for infor-

mation collection means that people are asked to provide all kinds of personal information when registering for particular sites. Some companies use cookies combined with Web

tracking technology to build profiles of frequent users' activities, then match these with registration information to build a very detailed profile of who's doing what. Web information is also matched with other information, further increasing the attack on personal privacy.

Of course, marketers express innocence, stating that such activities are thoroughly benign. They regularly and loudly proclaim that their company doesn't abuse the private information that it collects on the Net. They say their intentions are honourable, and that they need such information to build a profile that helps them justify their Web site. Cloak words such as "demographics," "profiling" and "traffic analysis" are used with abandon. They say that it's all done with the intention of good, honest, basic marketing research. Besides, it's the cost of visiting a Web site, they say.

Hogwash. Frankly, I don't believe them and don't trust their intentions. And indeed, like many Canadians, my Internet surfing activities are based on a foundation that the corporate world



speaks the right words, but fails to follow through with honest actions.

A case in point: while writing our *Mutual Funds and RRSP's Online* book last year, my wife, who often assists with

research, visited a number of financial Web sites. Each site required registration, and in doing so asked for some rather personal information. Of course, each site also promised not to abuse that information, indicating that private information was, well, private.

Concerned about our privacy, my wife used her maiden name when preparing such forms, and generally provided false information to many of the more personal questions. Within two weeks, she was receiving credit card solicitations in her maiden name from a credit card company that we had never heard of before. Given that we have been married for 10 years, at which point she dropped use of that name, it is obvious that one of the sites that promised not to share the information collected had done exactly that.

In our experience, this type of incident is not isolated. And our experience is that more and more sites are seeking to invade our privacy. To me, the most egregious and offensive example of a privacy grab happens to be found on the Canada NewsWire Web site at

www.newswire.ca, which asks for income levels, investment values and other personal information. The site states that information won't be misused, and that your privacy will be respected.

Let me sell you this bridge in Brooklyn, I say.

This rush to collect private information online stinks to high heaven. Like many, I am thoroughly disgusted with the approach that many corpo-

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rate sites take in the name of "marketing research," and refuse to provide such information.

I fight back, as do many users of the Internet, by not giving any real information unless I happen to be entering

into a real, economic, legally binding contract. In countless cases, I have told these offensive organizations that my name is Bill Gates or Jean Chrétien. I provide bogus answers to their inane questions. On occasion, when my blood boils, I write more offensive things into their offensive Web forms, hoping they will get the hint. And more often than not, I'll choose to take my business elsewhere.

My attitude is not unique; indeed, personal privacy is emerging as one of the foundations to the activities for many Web servers. Every marketing executive should visit the Cluetrain Manifesto at www.cluetrain.com to get a sense of the attitude emerging online towards current marketing-related privacy grabs.

For this reason, it is obvious that IBM has shown a remarkable level of understanding of the changing attitude occurring with consumers. The company should be applauded for taking an aggressive and proactive stance on the privacy issue.

To the rest of you, I all too eagerly condemn you for each and every private bit of information that you try to collect.

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